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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CASC](#) [KDEM](#) [TI](#)  
SUBJECT: FAITH-BASED NGO GIVEN BREATHING ROOM

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CLASSIFIED BY: Tracey A. Jacobson, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy  
Dushanbe, STATE.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Operation Mercy got a reprieve April 5 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the expatriate members could remain in country on their current visas. Consular Department Chief Bahrom Kholnazarov gave ConOff no reason for the about-face, but we strongly believe this to be the result of strong protests from the U.S. and British ambassadors about the legality and procedures followed. The Operation Mercy case provides an interesting example of the power struggle between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Justice, and possibly the State Committee on National Security. It also serves as evidence that the Tajik government will sometimes respond to coordinated international pressure. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Consular Department Chief Bahrom Kholnazarov urgently summoned ConOff the morning of April 15. Almost one week had passed since ConOff had first started calling Kholnazarov to request a meeting regarding the expulsion of Operation Mercy's foreign staff from Tajikistan (reftel A). After a few pleasantries, Kholnazarov cut to the chase and told ConOff, "The question is resolved." When ConOff asked Kholnazarov for clarification, Kholnazarov said that the foreign staff of Operation Mercy would be permitted to stay in Tajikistan on their current visas, as long as the courts were working through the case. Asked to specify that this meant work visas, Kholnazarov said yes, and that the decision applied to all foreign staff, not only the U.S. citizens. Post expects to receive a diplomatic note by the end of the week confirming these details.

¶3. (C) Kholnazarov expressed his regret that this situation had progressed to this point. He told ConOff that it was "unfortunate" that he had not been informed by Operation Mercy earlier about its problems, as he may have been able to do something. Now, he said, the problem had become much more complicated. (Kholnazarov did not specify how he could have helped Operation Mercy earlier.) According to Operation Mercy director Paul Linge, the Ministry of Justice had pursued his organization because of its unlicensed English language courses, but was not pressing for its expulsion from Tajikistan. Instead, the pressure seemed to stem from the State Committee for National Security, the former KGB, which has been interviewing local Christians about Operation Mercy's activities

and may have subsequently pressured Foreign Affairs to cancel the visas. Linge also noted that Operation Mercy's problems began in earnest after a downsizing in which he let two employees go, whom he later learned were government informants.

4.(C) Kholnazarov informed ConOff that Linge was scheduled to meet with Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaripov an hour later to explain Operation Mercy's mission in Tajikistan. Linge called ConOff after the meeting to confirm that Zaripov repeated what Kholnazarov told ConOff: let the courts decide the case. Operation Mercy's staff can remain in country on the visas they currently possess.

5.(C) Comment: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' sudden turn-around on the visa revocation for the American, European and Australian staff was an important correction of a situation that should have not have existed in the first place. However, the entire affair demonstrates just how tenuous the operating conditions for non-governmental organizations in Tajikistan can be. More than likely, the about-face was a result of coordinated diplomatic pressure from the American and British Embassies, including the Ambassador's raising it personally with Zaripov (reftel B). Unfortunately, the case may not be entirely closed -- if the appeals process with the Ministry of Justice and Education fails to produce a license for Operation Mercy, it is possible the international staff will not receive renewals when their visas expire. This has at least allowed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to save face, and the expatriate staff to remain in country...for the time being. End Comment.

JACOBSON

HUSHEK